

# Top prize won by artist who taught himself

BY DALYA ALBERGE, ARTS CORRESPONDENT

A SELF-TAUGHT artist who took up painting after abandoning a successful career as a fashion designer won a leading art prize yesterday.

Clive Smith, 32, whose employers as a designer included the international clothes chain Gap, won the £10,000 BP Portrait Award for *Double Single*, depicting a young man reclining alone on a double bed.

Observed in meticulous detail, and with a raw honesty reminiscent of Lucian Freud, the composition captures the intricate textures of materials and skin tones. The judges said they were particularly struck by the composition and Smith's use of light.

After studying fashion design at Kingston Polytechnic between 1985 and 1988, Smith worked in New York, Paris and Naples for various fashion companies.

In 1996, disillusioned with the fashion world — and realising that he had little interest in clothes after all — he decided to break away.

Smith, whose father was a product engineer and whose mother taught dance, used his savings to support himself for three years, training himself to paint by paying for his own models, including the one in the winning portrait, and taking drawing classes.

Unusually for an artist winning such recognition, he has no art school qualification: "I



Runners-up: top, *Boyish Boo* by Rebecca Driffield; and Andrew Tift's *Tony Benn*

feel with figurative painting that there are very few good people teaching. There are so few who can do the work themselves... Because I'm older, I knew how I wanted to paint."

Apart from receiving his big break when a dealer in Mon-

treil decided to represent him, he won third prize in the BP Portrait Awards last year.

This year the BP award's second prize, of £5,000, went to the Australian painter Rebecca Driffield, 39, who lives in Paris, for *Boyish Boo*, a portrait of her husband.

The third prize, of £3,000, was awarded to Andrew Tift for his portrait of Tony Benn, a commission from the House of Commons. Mr Benn was so impressed that he told the National Portrait Gallery that he preferred it to the one by Humphrey Ocean in the gallery's collection.

Tift, 30, studied art at Birmingham Polytechnic and at university in London; he now lives in Walsall. This is the fifth time he has submitted work for the BP Portrait Award. His work was commended and won the BP Travel Award in 1994.

He said: "My imagery is predominantly figurative with a realistic approach, though I sometimes take a more experimental stance which questions the importance of likeness and resemblance... My work cannot be described exclusively as portraiture as there is often a strong narrative content to my pictures, where I use symbolism or allegory."

This year's BP Travel Award was won by Jennifer McCrae, whose training included Grays School of Art in Aberdeen, for an "enterprising



Clive Smith's *Double Single*, which won the BP Portrait Award and was praised for its composition and use of light

project" that involved studying methods of teaching portraiture in Brussels.

Charles Saumarez Smith, director of the National Portrait Gallery, chaired the jury, which had to look at more than 700 paintings. The works were submitted for judging anonymously, "which should mean it's done completely fair-

ly without knowing who painted a work, which does influence one's judgment", Mr Saumarez Smith said. "We don't know who the people are, and don't necessarily recognise them from previous years."

The quality of the works gave the lie to those who suggested that painting was a dead tradition, he said. The

popularity of the exhibition that follows the awards — there were 137,000 visitors last year — "puts it in the league of one of the most popular exhibitions in England".

This year's judges included Penny Johnson, director of the Government Art Collection, Julia Peyton-Jones, director of the Serpentine Gallery, the

fashion designer Bruce Oldfield and the artist John Keane. The exhibition of the shortlisted artists continues at the National Portrait Gallery, which this year is celebrating 20 years of the portrait award and ten years of BP sponsorship, until September 26.





**OPERA**  
 Bryn Terfel  
 storming out  
 at the Bastille  
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# Faces that stand out in the crowd

Rachel Campbell-Johnston finds out what winners are made of in the 1999 BP Portrait Awards

Somewhere on that bottled-beer but definitely no-nibbles circuit which ring-roads the outskirts of contemporary art, I bumped into a painter called Peter Monkman. He was in satisfied mood. He had just had a painting accepted for the BP Portrait Award.

The thing was, he told me, he had entered the competition at least twice before but had never been selected. The panel hadn't liked the big bold triptychs of his body, or the way that he incorporated stuck-on swatches of hair. So he had decided this year to tailor his art to the tastes of the selectors. Clearly it worked. *Joe-Boy*, a precise small-scale portrait of his baby son, can now be seen hanging on the National Portrait Gallery's walls.

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"Every prize has its own flavour," says Julia Offord, who is exhibiting a portrait of Jack, her video game-playing son. She describes how she and a fellow artist flipped through a book of nudes and agreed at first glance on all the artworks which BP judges would accept. But neither of them could pinpoint why.

"I just tried to choose a picture that would stand out," says Clive Smith, the winner, whose atmospheric portrait is heavy with an air of solitary withdrawal. "If I did anything, I tried to do something that would be striking when you first saw it," says Michael Gaskell, whose commended portrait *Jonathan* (pictured) has a stark, photorealist tone.

But to make a painting striking scarcely counts as a trick. Insipidity, after all, is hardly desirable in art. And the panel must initially judge by some pretty superficial criteria as more than 600 entries are paraded past. No wonder there is a leaning towards tilted perspectives and odd picture crops in the 51 paintings that are weeded out for display. The selectors have few starry physiognomies to steer by. The sitters are mostly unknown. And though every human face may indeed, like the oft-cited snowflake, be miraculously individual, compact them together and they melt into one mass.

Yet walking into the current BP Portrait Award show I felt like a 15-year-old in my first week at boarding school where all the faces were different, yet shared a similar tone. What all successful BP portraits share is an air of intimacy. An atmosphere of the personal, the private, marks them out from the more conventional chairman-of-the-board style.

This intimacy reveals itself particularly strongly this year in a prevalence of almost photographically precise pictures,



Commended: Michael Gaskell's photorealist portrait of *Jonathan*

body as overbearing as a/sla of black rock. In contrast Stephen Shankland's shy little portrait of his girlfriend has an almost painful tenderness.

Still other entries suggest intimacy through a mood of meditative withdrawal. The viewer stands an excluded witness to silent emotions in the atmospheric melancholy of Smith's winning portrait, or the wakeful dream of the subject of Lewis Chamberlain's commended *Night Painting*.

In an age of in-your-face art it may be ironic that the portrait should be tending to such quietness of tone. But then the BP prize is less interested in pushing back parameter than in the skill which the painter can bring to his craft. "It is about painting as much as portraiture," says the gallery director, Charles Saumarez Smith.

Many contemporary artists have grown addicted to the fashionable high of the shock. But even Peter Monkman has to admit that in abandoning arrogant gesture for a more tranquil focus on skill, he caught the character of his baby son far more intimately. And surely this is a handy trick for a portraitist to turn?

● National Portrait Gallery (0171-306 0059), from Friday until Sept 26

in the mock 1930s-style social realism of Andrew Tiff's commended portrait of Tony Benn or, the painstaking detail of Benedict Henriques's *Young Woman and Vanities*.

But intimacy reveals itself in many other ways. Most of the painters — probably through financial necessity — choose friends, family, or their own faces as subjects. The personal relationship between painter and model is marked. Arran Steen, a warden in the neighbouring National Gallery, captures "the big influence my father had on my life". He presents him almost like a pugilist: his face a cacophony of loud clashing colours, his